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ABSTRACT

Increased emphasis on the cultural dimension in second language instruction has appeared in recent years, as evidenced in the content of standardized school-leaving tests used in Great Britain. One purpose of the cultural element of instruction is to make real the language being learned, but another is to stress its potential usefulness. Some cultural topics to be covered include industry and economy, mass media, history, geography, government and politics, regions, cities, educational systems, food and drink, and sports. Some of this information may already be known by the students, making it a better basis for learning. For advanced classes, more involved cultural subjects can be used, such as dialects, theater and the arts, and folk tales and customs. As much of this instruction as possible should be done in the target language, and it can be introduced spontaneously or formally in the classroom. Projects and group work lead to seeking out information, which is also an important learning process. Literature, as part of the cultural dimension, should be included, but should be chosen carefully so that students can relate to it. (MSE)

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Brendan Quinn

THE INTERCULTURAL DIMENSION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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An effective study of the intercultural dimension in language teaching can only be undertaken when the cultural dimension itself has first been examined. The latter refers to any cultural phenomena in the countries of the target language which can be used to further language learning. In English it is often called a study of a "country's life and institutions", in German "Landeskunde", and in French "civilisation".

The intercultural element arises when comparisons are drawn and judgements are made about the cultural phenomena in one's own country and those prevailing in the countries of the target language. Once the pupil learns of some aspect of life in another country it is almost automatically linked with aspects of life in his/her own country. The intercultural aspect is so inextricably related to the cultural aspect that one can rarely study one without reference to the other. The thrust of this short paper will be more an analysis of the cultural dimension with allusions to the intercultural dimension.

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The cultural element is not entirely a new concept in language learning, but it has really only come to the forefront in recent years. In the 1984 Leaving Certificate papers at both higher and ordinary levels in French and German only one item appeared which related directly to life in a French- or German-speaking country. It was an article from the Spiegel magazine concerning difficulties pupils had with their homework in Germany today. The essay titles on the higher level papers were for the most part a vague, abstract or pseudo-intellectual nature. The 1985 papers were quite different. In the French aural comprehension, for instance, there was a realistic conversation, an interview from the radio, a France Inter road information service bulletin, and a news broadcast. They were in the kind of French the pupil is likely to encounter in a French-speaking country, and furthermore contained the kind of information which would be useful to him/her.

In the written papers in French there were present-day texts. On the higher level paper the pupil was required to write a letter to a French tourist board and on the ordinary level paper he/she was required to write a letter about working in France. Opinions about topical subjects - drunken driving and unemployment - were to be expressed on the higher level paper. On the German papers too newspaper reports appeared. The letter on the higher level paper concerned working in a German-speaking country. The pupil was also required to elaborate on notes concerning cinema advertisements, menus, postal instructions, etc.

We have here a transition from a more abstract and academically oriented language learning (with emphasis on

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literature, grammar and essay questions) to a more practical, pupil-related one. The same development is mirrored in textbooks in use. In *La Langue des Français* (Watson, first published in 1963, 1er livre) there is virtually nothing about life in France. In *Salut!* (published in 1983) there appear a list and maps of French-speaking countries, notes on a French film star, information about letter-writing, advertisements in French tourist brochures and newspapers, information about trains and school. The cultural dimension has helped us to turn to a more interesting and "real" side of language. The cultural dimension is clearly linked with the communicative approach.

One of the purposes of the cultural element is to make real to the pupils the language they are learning. This knowledge about the country whose language is being acquired can be used to motivate. A pupil who perceives that the language is representative of a real people, who lead real lives, who live in a real country with real (albeit different) institutions, will learn more willingly than a pupil who perceives language learning as something confined to the classroom and exams.

The reason why so many foreigners learn and often speak English so well is none other than a utilitarian one. They realize the effective use of English can lead to their own advancement and gain. The importance of English itself acts as a motivator. By employing the cultural dimension purposefully and stressing the importance of the languages we teach for the pupils' careers we see how the cultural element becomes an important motivator.

The following are some basic aspects which can be covered in the classroom: industry and the economy, newspapers and the media, history, geography, government and political parties, regions, cities, the educational system, food and drink, sport. The depth to which the subject is treated depends on the age of the pupils and the standard of the class.

It should be remembered that some or a good deal of the information might already be familiar to the learners. In geography, for instance, many of those learning Spanish would know what a map of Spain with physical features looks like. It requires then just a little on the teacher's part to give an authentic geography lesson on Spain in Spanish. On the basis of a cultural element, knowledge which pupils know already being fused with some new knowledge being imparted by the teacher, communication in the target language can take place.

For advanced classes knowledge of more involved aspects of culture can be provided: dialects, theatre and the arts, folk tales and customs. As the pupils become aware of other aspects of their own culture, so these can be matched with more involved aspects of the other country's culture. It is probably at this stage that the intercultural dimension can be utilized most effectively. With a deeper knowledge of both their own and the other country's life and institutions the pupils should be

induced to compare and evaluate for themselves.

One may consider whether information about a country's culture should be imparted through English or through the actual language being learned. I feel as much as possible should be done through the target language. As all or some of the pupils would already be familiar with at least some of the information the teacher is supplying, it is not necessary that they understand every word or, at times, very much at all for the basic message to be grasped. There are, however, occasions when the use of English might be more expedient.

Another consideration is whether cultural information should flow naturally and spontaneously from class discussion or some incident in the classroom or whether it should be presented in a well-prepared and formal manner. Why not draw from both sources? Both sources complement each other.

Providing a cultural dimension, which is the basis for the intercultural dimension, entails certain consequences for teachers. It means that we as teachers must live in and travel to the countries whose languages we teach to collect authentic material for use in school. How else can we obtain postcards, bus and tram tickets, railway timetables, maps, slides, books, cassettes, etc., which we can show to our pupils to illustrate a particular cultural phenomenon. Above all a genuine knowledge of the people and country can only be attained by living and travelling in the country. Providing the cultural dimension requires a considerable competence on our parts. Without a thorough knowledge of cultural phenomena, we are in no position to promote the intercultural dimension.

The latter lends itself to an extremely important educational aim. The comparing of one's own culture with another can lead to projects and group work. The pupils could acquire this information by writing or going to embassies and cultural institutes. Seeking out and evaluating information is an important learning process in itself.

The cultural dimension adds variety, stimulation and enjoyment to language learning. When this leads to the intercultural dimension and the comparisons involved, the pupils should be induced to see cultural phenomena in various countries as different from one another rather than inferior or superior. The role of the intercultural dimension should be to reduce prejudices and increase flexibility.

A final word. Literature is a part of the cultural dimension. It is a vital expression of any country's culture and values and accordingly should be furthered and encouraged as much as possible within the classroom. But ... let us choose literature to which our pupils can relate.